

CLOCKWORK

BY G. B. STERN

"To Every Riviera Girl Comes Her Millionaire. And to Every Millionaire Comes the Illusion That He is Loved For Himself Alone. The World Goes Round—By Clockwork."

AT TWENTY-ONE, Annunziata was perfect—and asleep. Oh, soundly asleep. Her beauty was demure, her disposition obedient. She was deliciously young and slim and fragrant. She spoke French and Italian and Spanish as nonchalantly as English. Maria Annunziata was for sale. The bidding was high, and would have been higher but for the slightly sinister background of Maria Annunziata's aunt.

Aunt Juana, gambling on a wealthy marriage, dressed Maria Annunziata much more exquisitely than she could afford during the Riviera season, and for the rest of the year retired with her into the cheap obscurity of some little foreign town. They were never in England. England was a place where Maria Annunziata might get ideas.

Her father had been an Englishman, who had died three years after his marriage with Consuelo, a beautiful dummy of comb and castanets and draped mantilla. Consuelo had trailed languidly about the Continent for a few years, with her older sister, Juana, and the little Annunziata, and then returned to pneumonia.

To every Riviera girl comes her millionaire. And to every millionaire comes the snow-white illusion that he is loved for himself alone. Thus the world goes round—by clockwork.

"He will propose tonight at the Casino ball, and you will accept him," said Maria Annunziata's aunt.

That night Maria Annunziata wore an innocent little gown woven of dewdrops, and said "yes" three times, and "no" once, in her soft, shy way, in answer to the questions:

"Do you love me?" "Have you ever loved any one else?" "Will you marry me?" "Do you like pearls?"

The clockwork was still in excellent working order. And the last question was not the one to which she answered "No."

"Darling—darling!" cried the enraptured Julius Rehan and "darling—darling" cried Maria Annunziata's aunt. "You have made me so happy. Fortunate little one that you have."

The girl thought it was very easy, simply to do as she was told and be praised for it. And she really did adore pearls. Their circle of friends at Monte Carlo, when the glorious news was triumphantly announced, remarked in chorus that the whole

world was "so romantic," as, indeed, it could not be otherwise, in that setting of scented dusk, orange trees, distant orchestra, mimosa, and moonlight on the blue Mediterranean.

Julius Rehan was a millionaire. His age was fifty-three, and his disposition solemn. He wore a beard; his nose was a tiny bit swollen, and of slightly deeper hue than his cheeks. The puffy skin under his eyes was intersected by a whole irritation system of wrinkles. He was a millionaire.

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MARIA ANNUNZIATA, unchaperoned for once, allowed a stranger to speak to her and did not snub him. The lapse was deliberate mischief and in defiance of all warnings. She argued that it could not possibly lead to awful results, now that she was safely engaged. But he looked clean and merry and attractive—oh, and young! And Juana was in bed with a cold. More, Julius was away for six days on business. And though Julius would be undoubtedly a kind husband, she did not suppose he would be kind enough to let her let herself be thoroughly joyously a rogue and a rebel.

Dick Carrington thought she was lovely. He fell in love.

As he was twenty-four,

The atmosphere of this romance was not romantic, like the Casino terrace by moonlight, mimosa-scented. The back room of the obscure English tea shop in which they sat had transported to Monte Carlo the faded gentility of similar tea shops in Brixton, Clapham and Islington. A dusty aspidistra stood on each bamboo table; plush-framed views of Marble Arch and Hyde Park corner hung on the wall. The very buns were stale. Dick, being a fierce Anglo-Saxon, came there every day for his tea, in order to smell the aspidistra; he did not like mimosa.

Maria Annunziata wandered in under the orders of fate.

"There is no salt on my table," she replied, eyes demurely veiled. "But señorita here will doubtless get some." She passed on his request to the proprietress with the stiff linen collar and the toothy smile, who just then entered with a tray. Miss Robinson was surprised, but brought him salt. Annunziata

watched him, slantways, from under her curling dark lashes. He was eating damp currant cake and drinking tea.

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Maria Annunziata could not help herself—she broke into ripples of delighted laughter.

"Why you can laugh!" exclaimed Dick, joyfully. "You were so beautiful. I thought you must be clock-work!"

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SHE could not resent his frank infatuation; moreover, she was delicately flattered that he should so have desired an excuse to speak to her that he should have drunk tea and salt as an excuse to achieve it. It was a knightly act.

"And I wasn't even sure if you were English or not," he went on.

"Both," replied the clockwork girl, passing from laughter to mystery. "Are you staying long on this rotten old Riviera?"

Now, indeed, Maria Annunziata opened wide her big brown eyes; it was the first time she had heard fashion's playground described as "this rotten Riviera."

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